THERE AND BACK AGAIN:

Architecture in development; activism, instrumentalism or instrumentalisation?

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ABSTRACT: [2]

This paper seeks to locate the practice of "socially conscious architecture" within a broader development theory approach. Numerous protagonists have appeared defending the position of "architecture as activism" with varying, albeit vague, definitions offered as to the nature of the practise. What is clear however is the idea of bringing architecture to the service of 'disadvantaged communities' and making a contribution toward social justice. The paper questions two aspects of this thought, first, how is the practice of architecture activism located within the greater development sphere? Second, in light of this perspective, is architecture able to actively contribute towards a form of "power activism" or is it simply a "service profession" which can only implement the agendas of other disciplines such as politics and economics? In this case can "architecture activism" be considered an oxymoron in the context of the broader development agenda?

[Keywords: post-development, architecture value(s), activism, instrumentalisation]

This paper is an attempt to formalise a few thoughts that intersect here with literature readings on the subject of architecture in development. The following discussion is the result of an architect's collusion with development theory; it is thus a first attempt at reconceptualising architecture within a broader development theory approach; whether this marriage is possible or even desirable remains debatable. The paper will briefly outline the current state and course of development theory without trying to be exhaustive. It further attempts to locate architecture within this trajectory; finally the debate turns to the role of architecture as either activism or instrumentalisation.

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First off development; understanding this term is one thing, defining it is quite another. Since the use of the word requires qualification due to its ambiguity, development has become an empty shell which can contain just about any human endeavour or perspective. While several formats exist, there is no consensus regarding a workable definition, consider the following; development is

> "…a process which enables human beings to realise their potential, build self-confidence and lead lives of dignity and fulfilment" (Nyerere, 1973)[3]

> "…in its strong sense… it means using the productive resources of society to improve the condition of poor people. In its weaker sense, development means more of everything for everyone in the context of a lot more for a few." (Peet & Hartwick, 1999)

> "The basic objective of human development is to enlarge people's choices" (Sen, 1999). He further outlines his approach of increasing human capabilities as a means of attaining such choices.

Both Sen and Nyerere are concerned with the development of people, not objects, while Peet and Hartwick are more concerned with the 'things' that they assume will enable such a goal to be reached. There are numerous other definitions concerned with economic aspects and various other pursuits. While this makes sense and sounds quite convincing, what is common in most such definitions is that they speak of a picturesque, or a type of utopian model that can be made possible under some prescribed efforts which differ depending on the author. Essentially, rather than *define*, these accounts *describe*, therefore such a pseudo definition can be understood as "a statement of the way a person, (group) picture the ideal condition of social existence… this exists nowhere and probably never will...[as such] every modern human activity can be undertaken in the name of development" (Rist, 2002). Similarly, the work of architecture, whose primary output is basically a description and imagination of possible forms to contain the physical world; architecture paints *promises* that are yet unseen. It is then the work of other disciplines that enable the promised reality to fail or succeed, such as economics and politics. So too, development in this sense can be considered as "the *management of a promise* [but] what if that promise does not deliver…[then] the chances are that development is a bad joke" (Nederveen Pieterse, 2000)

Since inception after World War II, development (as an industry) has experimented varying approaches to improve livelihoods in the South. In its six decade evolution, development has

3 Nyerere was the first president of Tanzania post-independence, the above is in light of his "Ujamaa" development approach as outlined in the Arusha Declaration of 1973. http://www.ntz.info/gen/b00524.html

failed to reach this goal although many theories have come and gone[4]. In this paper I will focus on development's most radical critique, post-development theory (Nederveen Pieterse, 2000). Coming to prominence in the late 90s, it was in the context of the fall of Soviet Socialism and in the face of the approaching new millennium that post-development literature declared the death of development (Sachs, 1992). Its position begins with the simple assessment of the point that the 'America Dream', that is, a middle class lifestyle for the majority of the world is impossible (Dasgupta, 1985). Drawing from my own work in Johannesburg, the goal of social housing in most projects was to convert slums, overcrowded hostels and other unsightly forms of dwelling, into "family units" (in other words, decent middle class dwellings). This goal was blocked by its own myriad of problems such as resources and politics, to top it up, the few projects that were realised faced gentrification among other social ills. Can it be said then, that even though architecture may do its work well, that is, to visualise and imagine the best designs possible; it appears that the product of architecture is impotent with regards to addressing these social realities. If so, does this imply that architecture has no place in this field or does this reality call for a different *product* from architecture other than plans, sections and elevations? In its current configuration, is the goal of social justice now set before architecture actually achievable?

The work of development has been to address what US president Truman defined for the first time in 1949 as "underdevelopment" (Truman, 1989). He cast underdevelopment primarily as the opposite of development, and since Truman established America (the North) as "the developed" the work of development was set to turn the then Third World into replicas of the West. In light of this situation, post-development theory argues that development is based on the false assumption that the North has the scientific knowledge to solve the problems in the South; that it is a *power-knowledge discourse* imposed on the South and in fact (re) produces the very 'underdevelopment' that it professes to address (Escobar, 1995). Therefore managing the development of others is an oxymoron and unachievable – post development theory supports people's ability to address their own problems, in other words, their *agency*. Architecturally, does this call for a 'mainstream-insation' of bare foot architecture? Or Rudofsy (1964)'s 'architecture without architects'? There are other development perspectives that attempt a sensitivity toward agency, these have produced ideas such as participatory or 'bottom up' development and informed community aided design processes in architecture,

[4] For a more detailed description of development theory(ies), refer to works such (Peet & Hartwick, 1999)

but these have been proved as "dangerous counterfeits" (Mosse, 2004) to real lasting improvement of livelihoods.

How then, is architecture placed within the developmental line of thought since it can be argued that architecture's 'tour de force' is in fact interventionist and managerial in nature and thus "involves telling people how to live" (Polvora, 2011). Also, when considering the underlying structural causes that produce these so called slums and other inequalities that architecture activism claims to address, does architecture possess the power to address such structural causes or does it merely attempt a 'band aid' solution to the symptoms of the problem. In such a case it could also be argued that since it merely works to make the symptoms a little more bearable, it in fact adds insult to injury and only prolongs the suffering. The global inequalities prominent in the neoliberal age of consumerism are perhaps outside the realm of architectural intervention. As a profession, and a discipline, what then has become of architecture in today's consumer society?

Benedikt (2005) argues that the much treasured *values* of architecture work against the (monetary) *value* or architecture in the age of commodification. First of all lets list architecture's generic *values* such as "architecture is for people; that integrity and honesty of expression are a virtue; that form follows function; that simplicity is beautiful; that cheap doesn't necessarily mean bad or ugly; that creativity is the architect's chief gift to society" (Benedikt, 2005). A consideration of two scenarios casts these as both virtue and vice to the 'capital' value of architecture. First, imagine an impasse has arisen in a project, while other professions of the built environment would hold their ground, because architects are meant to be 'creative' they are bound to be the most flexible party and give concessions. Second, when approached by a client for a project he/she can't afford, for fear of losing work and because 'cheap is not ugly', architects will take on such impossible feats and be even more 'creative' and thus sell their profession short. Soon every client is pushing this point even further and today project budgets are an exercise of starving the building, if not the architect (Benedikt, 2005).

Frampton (2005) labours this point further and shows that architecture has been working against itself and sapping its own monetary value and little wonder that it is increasingly powerless. Pushing on through 'specialisation' enforced in the built environment, such 'consultants' have occupied much of the architect's space and work for remuneration not creativity as architects further concede this arena to less able, yet tenacious 'specialists';

therefore, within the reality of the age of commodification, perhaps “less is in fact less”. A cross section reveals that in 1950 construction value made up 11% of the US GDP and by 1990 it had come down to 9.5%. In this time the construction quantity increased by 600% while its value decreased by 25% depicting how architecture has failed to compete with other products in the market place (Benedikt, 2005). Of course these linear projections are very simplistic but they support the point. Oddly enough, the 2008 economic crisis was caused by the housing market yet the money was not in the hands of architects or construction itself but in the finance world. In a sense it says that while architecture has considerable value and thus considerable power, in today’s neoliberal world however, this power is not in the hands of architecture. Power in the built environment is wielded by other consultants, professionals and disciplines and little wonder architecture is less able to create and pursue its own agenda.

Perhaps it was in response to these forces that at the turn of the millennium, various protagonists in architecture have come forward to defend the so called “architecture activism” as an attempt to address humanitarian and other causes of social justice. While even fewer definitions are offered as to what architecture activism entails, practitioners such as Architecture for Humanity and Basic Initiative define activism as architecture in the service of disadvantaged communities. Schools such as the University of Minnesota speak vaguely of programs for designers working for “social justice and community activism”. University of California Berkeley pursues work for communities that were ‘typically underserved by our profession’. The most bold definition came from the University of Southern California stating that “activism in architecture begins with the marshalling of resources and ends with the enactment of change” (Creech, 2010).

Two points come to mind considering the above, (1) if architecture as perceived by Frampton (2005) and Benedikt (2005), has lost its value and subsequent power further exacerbated under neoliberal commodification, how can it ‘marshal resources’ for disadvantaged communities? It appears that even at best, so called high end architecture can only serve the power of other disciplines. All the while its defenders work tirelessly to ‘creatively’ starve themselves along with the discipline. Further, (2) while development theory was declaring the death of development; mostly powered by International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGO) at the time; architecture was only beginning the NGO route. In a sense this can be considered as architecture’s pursuit of a new clientele perhaps in the wrong direction while operating in a different form; the NGO architect. Therefore, taking Benedikt’s (2005) logic further, architecture will be forced into even more ‘creativity’ which serves neither itself nor

its new clientele. While this paper is not against architecture's attempt at 'activism', the primary concern is a reflection of whether this is the answer, or if it is even tenable. In essence I argue here that activism in architecture can be better defined as a charity discourse than the pursuit of justice; if this is the case then I claim that it accomplishes more harm than good.

In light of this argument, it may well be that architecture is only serving to agitate the cause of social justice despite its well meant intentions. Over and above the critique levelled by post development theory, it is known that charity (in place of justice) is not a solution but a form of 'cold comfort' in the face of injustice. To take a broader panorama, Žižek (2009) argues that since capitalism took a cultural turn in 1968[5] evolving into 'cultural capitalism', it has made charity a basic constituent of today's economy. Prior to this, charity was a philanthropic undertaking conducted over and above the consumerist act (buying, selling, making profit); while today these two aspects are clustered together. For example, concerns for ecology and fair trade have been essentially monetised so that when you buy 'green products', part of the money is promised to 'saving mother earth', donating to charity and other noble pursuits. In this way, the very consumerist act now has a built in price for its opposite. In a sense, the sin contains an extra cost for redemption from the very sin itself. In this way it claims to repair with its right hand what it has actually broken with its left hand; thereby disguising the real nature and problems caused by capitalism. This way, charity – in place of justice works to cover up the very injustice it claims to be addressing, so too does the work of 'blind' architecture activism.

Furthermore, and drawing from Oscar Wilde, Žižek demonstrates that while charity is the natural reaction to the difficulties of poverty, it not only fails to solve - but it is actually part of the problem. Charity, by addressing the symptoms of the disease and not the disease itself it simply agitates the difficulty. In slavery for example, the worst slave owners were those who were nice to their slaves; this disguised the institution from being fully realised by those who suffered it or understood by those who contemplated it (Žižek, 2009). Considering all these arguments does architecture activism – which is really charity, work to agitate and disempower the very communities it seeks to help? If so, how can architecture take the road to real and lasting structural change as opposed to this cheap form of charitable optimism?

[5] Woodstock, anti war demonstrations and the 'summer of love'.

A glance at architecture activism as it exists reveals three points of consideration: Activism (1) occurs in and around architecture, as in famous examples such as Guy Fox's attempt to destroy London's parliament, making use of architecture as a symbol. In this example it's not exactly architecture activism – architecture simply sets the stage for activism. Alternatively (2) the architect as activist; in this sense the architect takes on a social problem in a charitable manner which according to the above, results in the devaluation of architecture and an agitation of the situation. Finally, (3) architecture literally as activist itself, here I cite the work of celebrated Australian activist architect Andrew Maynard. His Styx Valley Protest Shelter project located in South Tasmania is a two storey timber shelter which literally attaches to trees as a way of protesting deforestation; it also serves to shelter protesters. This project mimics India's socio ecological Chipko movement of the 1970s (Rawat, 2004). Chipko means to cling, or hug, popularised by peasant women who acted to protect traditional forest rights and changed the national policy, hence the popular term "tree huggers". In this project, Maynard literally replaces the tree hugger with a building; whether he is successful or not is debatable, however, one can't resist remarking on the irony of employing a shed made from processed wood clinging to a tree to protect other trees.

I will not attempt a decisive conclusion here as this draft is merely a provocative reflection on what is possible in architecture as far as the pursuit of social justice is concerned; through an enquiry into the theory and practice of the so called 'architecture activism'. Though I have painted a dim picture, the intention is to awaken architecture to a reflective stance in hope of formulating appropriate reconfiguration and responses to the real causes of social inequality. The current move towards an interdisciplinary approach to address complex problems may offer a clue in its resonance with figures like Michelangelo and the 'renaissance men' of yesteryear. Perhaps practicing a 'moral architecture' in today's environment calls for a re-education of the architect to awaken and reoccupy the arena that has given way to the demands of global *financialisation*, that is eroding the profession and serving neither the discipline nor society. If such 'activism' is an attempted escape from this corner, delving into poverty 'NGO style' may not be the answer judging from the declining NGO practice. Although current changes are bound to produce new spaces and opportunity for architecture to reinvent itself, it can still learn a lot from development theory and other disciplines to better equip architects and the discipline in a changing world.

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